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ABSTRACT

Standardized test scores are used to determine outcomes at national, state, and local school district levels; and teachers feel pressure to raise their students' scores on high stakes tests. This study evaluated score enhancing strategies most likely used by student teachers and their perceptions about the degree of appropriateness of these strategies. At the end of their student teaching experience, 74 student teachers responded to 2 questionnaires each with 17 items reflecting teacher strategies for test score enhancement. In the first questionnaire, preservice teachers rated 17 items for frequency of use on a 6-point scale. In the second questionnaire, the teachers rated the same 17 items for appropriateness of use on a 6-point scale. Descriptive statistics and correlations were computed. Score enhancement strategies considered inappropriate included altering answers, dismissing low achieving students from taking the test, presenting actual test items for practice, allowing more time for students to take the test, and giving hints to students. Appropriate strategies included checking the completed answer sheets, teaching test taking skills, and preparing teaching objectives based on standardized test items. Other strategies received mixed ratings. The results highlight the need for preservice teachers to consider ethical issues concerning test preparation strategies. Three tables are included. (Author/RLC)

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Quest for Test Success: Preservice Teachers' Views of "High Stakes" Tests

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Quest for Test Success: Preservice Teachers' Views of "High Stakes" Tests

Abstract

Standardized test scores are being used to determine outcomes at the national, state, and local school district levels. Teachers feel pressured to raise their students' scores on these "high stakes" tests. This study investigated score enhancing strategies most likely to be used by student teachers, and their perceptions regarding the degree of appropriateness of these strategies.

Seventy-four student teachers responded to 17 items reflecting teacher strategies for test score enhancement. Descriptive statistics and correlations were computed for frequency of use and appropriateness of use of each teaching strategy. Score enhancement strategies considered inappropriate included alterning answers, dismissing low achieving students from taking the test, presenting actual test items for practice, allowing more time for the test, and giving hints to students. Appropriate strategies included checking the completed answer sheets, teaching test taking skills, and preparing teaching objectives based on standardized test items. Other strategies received mixed ratings.

The findings suggest a need for preservice teachers to participate in discussions on the ethical issues of test preparation strategies.

Quest for Test Success: Preservice Teachers' Views of "High Stakes" Tests

Description of the Problem

There is a growing concern about the quality of public education in this nation. Much of this dissatisfaction is due to an overall decline in student performance on standardized achievement tests. Scores on standardized tests have been widely used by the public as a valid indicator of educational achievement (Haertel & Calfee, 1983). Standardized test scores are being used to determine a variety of outcomes at the national, state, and local levels. Haladyna, Haas, and Nolen (1989 cited in Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991) have listed 29 different uses of standardized tests:

> These uses range from policy analysis at the national level to parental review of their child's achievement. For instance, test scores are used to rank states by the United States Department of Education in its annual 'Report Card,' and by legislators and other government officials to assess educational effectiveness of states and school districts. School boards and school district personnel use test scores to determine the effectiveness of their districts and schools within each district. Newspapers rank school districts by test scores to bemoan the failure of education. Test scores are used by some school district personnel to determine merit pay and to make other personnel decisions.

> Real estate agents use test scores to rate neighborhoods in terms of the 'quality of schools'. (cited in Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991, p. 2)

Since standardized test scores are used for so many different kinds of outcomes, it is easy to understand why they are now being called "high stakes" tests.

With the increasing use of standardized achievement tests in our schools, teachers have felt the pressure to do all they can to raise students' scores. Researchers have documented a number of test preparation practices used by teachers in preparing students for tests. Some of these practices include: a) enhancing student motivation for the test, b) building curriculum for the test, c) developing teaching objectives to match the test, d) providing students practice with items similar to those on the test, e) teaching "test wiseness", f) using commercially prepared exercises designed specifically to improve test scores, and g) sharing actual test items with the students prior to actual testing. Teachers also engage in score influencing activities during the actual administration of the standardized tests such as giving hints, altering response sheets, darkening student responses or erasing stray marks after they have completed the tests, and requesting low-ability students to absent themselves from taking the test (Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991).

Pychometricians and other researchers in this field have

identified issues related to teachers' use of appropriate and inappropriate test preparation practices. To date no researchers have investigated the relationship between the test preparation strategies teachers consider appropriate and their likelihood of using these strategies in the classroom to enhance students' standardized test scores.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were to answer the following questions:

1. What score enhancing strategies are pre-service teachers likely to use with their students?
2. What score enhancing strategies would pre-service teachers consider appropriate to use with their students?
3. Is there a relationship between score enhancing strategies pre-service teachers consider appropriate and the frequency with which they are likely to use the strategies in the classroom?

Research Methods

Sample

The sample for the study consisted of one cohort of student teachers (n=74). These student teachers represented all teaching levels and 90% of the sample were females. The student teachers filled out the surveys at the end of their student teaching experience.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument consisted of two similar questionnaires. Each questionnaire contained 17 items reflecting teacher strategies for test score enhancement. These 17 items were generated from a review of the literature. Specifically, the information provided by Haladyna, Nolen, and Haas (1991), Mehrens and Kaminski (1989), and Mehrens, Cole, and Popham (1991) was used as a guide in developing the survey items.

In the first questionnaire, pre-service teachers were asked to rate the 17 items for frequency of use on a six point scale ranging from "never use" to "definitely use". In the second questionnaire, the same 17 items are rated by the teachers for appropriateness of use on a six point scale ranging from "most inappropriate" to "most appropriate". The 17 items in each questionnaire were randomly ordered to minimize order effects.

The frequency of use questionnaire was administered first followed by the appropriateness of use questionnaire. Since both questionnaires contained the same items, responses on the first questionnaire were likely to have a carry over effect on the responses to the second questionnaire. The researchers believed that the carry over effect would be minimized if the student teachers were asked to indicate frequency of use in the first questionnaire and appropriateness in the second one.

A six point scale was chosen over the more popular five point scale to minimize the effect of the central tendency

response set. The six point scale allowed the researchers to collapse the numerical information to a three point scale in presenting the data.

The questionnaire was reviewed by several teachers for clarity of instruction and item wording. The administered version reflected the feedback of the teachers.

Procedures

Student teachers were verbally informed of the purpose of the study and provided directions for completing the first questionnaire. After they had completed the first questionnaire they were administered the second one. A numerical code was used to identify each student teacher's responses to the first and second questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were calculated for each item on both questionnaires. Pearson product moment correlations were calculated for frequency of use and appropriateness of use for each item. Then each of the 17 correlation coefficients were tested for significance.

Results

Results are grouped into three categories. Data on student teachers' likelihood of use of various score enhancement strategies will be discussed first followed by data on appropriateness of score enhancement strategies. Finally, correlational data linking student teachers' responses on

likelihood of use and appropriateness will be presented.

Strategies unlikely to be used in enhancing test scores

All the student teachers responding to the questionnaire indicated that they are unlikely to dismiss low achieving pupils on the test day or change answers of low achieving pupils who take the tests. Most of the student teachers are unlikely to change answers of their pupils, give hints and clues during the test, or allow more than the allocated time for test taking. Over two-thirds of the student teachers were unlikely to present actual test items for practice, rephrase wording of test questions for the pupils, or provide no special preparation for pupils. These data are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Strategies likely to be used in enhancing test scores

Most of the student teachers indicated that they would encourage their pupils to do their best on the test and would check the pupils' completed answer sheets. Three-quarters of the student teachers indicated that they would send notes home to the pupils' parents and teach the pupils test taking skills. Two-thirds of student teachers would have their pupils practice on alternative forms of the actual test and about half the student teachers would used commercially prepared materials to prepare pupils for standardized tests.

Student teachers' responses to items regarding preparation of teaching objectives or curriculum based on standardized tests indicated a certain amount of ambivalence. This was reflected in the ratings being scattered across the entire range of the scale. These data are presented in Table 1.

Score enhancing strategies considered inappropriate

Student teachers' responses to appropriateness of the various score enhancing strategies indicated that by and large the strategies that are unlikely to be used are also rated as being the most inappropriate. Thus, most of the student teachers considered changing the answers of low achieving pupils, dismissing low achieving pupils from taking the standardized test, and allowing more than the allocated time for the test as inappropriate strategies. More than two-thirds of the student teachers felt that it would be inappropriate to present actual test items for practice or give hints or clues to the pupils while they were taking the standardized test. Over half the student teachers considered it inappropriate to provide no special preparation for the standardized tests. Although three-quarters of the student teachers were unlikely to rephrase the wording of test questions for their pupils, only one-third of the respondents considered this strategy inappropriate. These data are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Score enhancing strategies considered appropriate

Most of the student teachers consider it appropriate to encourage pupils to do their best on the test, to teach pupils test taking skills, to check pupils' completed test answer sheet for stray marks, erasures etc., and to send a note to the pupils' parents urging them to help their children with the impending test. About two-thirds of the student teachers consider practice with commercially prepared score boosting activities as appropriate. Although two-thirds of the student teachers were likely to allow pupils to practice on alternative forms of the test, only about one-third of the student teachers considered it to be an appropriate strategy. These data are presented in Table 2.

Correlation between likelihood of use and appropriateness of strategies

Fifteen of the possible seventeen correlations between ratings of likelihood of use and appropriateness were positive and significant at $p < .01$. Of the two remaining correlations one was positive but non-significant and one correlation was undefined due to lack of variation in one of the variables. In general, student teachers were consistent in what strategies they were likely to use and the strategies they considered

appropriate. These data are presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Conclusion and Discussion

Haldayna, Nolen and Haas (1991) have appraised the ethics of a variety of test preparation activities. In their view, it is considered "ethical" to provide training in testwiseness skills, check answer sheets, and increase students' motivation through appeals to students and parents. It is considered "unethical" to develope curriculum based on the test, prepare objectives based on test items, or use items similar to those on the test or commercially prepared score boosting activities. Presenting items verbatim from the test or dismissing low-achieving students on the testing day are considered "highly unethical" test preparation activities.

Our data reveal that preservice teachers' views are congruent with the evaluation of Haladyna et al. (1991), for strategies listed as "ethical" or "highly unethical" by them. However, the test preparation strategies considered "unethical" by Haladyna, et al., are considered "appropriate" by preservice teachers and are likely to be used by them. Thus, the data suggest that preservice teachers can make acceptable judgements about appropriateness when the extremes of the continuum of ethical and unethical test preparation activities are considered,

but fail to do so in the intermediate range of the continuum. Either the preservice teachers have not been exposed to the entire continuum of ethical and unethical test preparation activities in the course of their training or their responses are tempered by the "reality of high-stakes testing".

In the broader context of the role of standardized testing in education, our research suggests the need for further study, in particular about the role of the teacher in preparing students for these tests. In the more specific context of the ethics of score enhancement strategies used by teachers, our study reveals a significant gap between the views of educational researchers and the views of preservice teachers. These researchers have already documented that educators vary considerably on opinions regarding test preparation and administration practices they see as "cheating". It is likely that they consider any practice that boosts test scores to be legitimate (Haladyna et al., 1991). There is urgent need incorporate a systematic discussion of issues related to appropriate test preparation practices in our teacher education programs and have avenues open to have the same discussions at the inservice level.

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Table 1

Likelihood of Use of Various Test Score-Enhancement Strategies

Strategies	% Disagreeing	% Neutral	% Agreeing
1. Teaches objectives based on standardized test	16.3	32.5	51.3
2. Teach according to test objectives	16.3	44.6	39.2
3. Change completed answer sheets	98.6	0.0	1.4
4. Rephrase wording of questions.	75.7	14.7	9.5
5. Give hints or clues	94.6	5.4	0.0
6. Dismiss low achieving students from test-taking	100.0	0.0	0.0
7. Present actual test items for practice	76.1	20.3	8.2
8. No special preparation	69.0	27.0	4.1
9. Develop curriculum based on test content	18.4	43.3	27.1
10. Encourage students to do their best	0.0	2.7	97.3
11. Practice alternative form of test	17.6	16.2	66.2
12. Allow more than allocated time for test taking	94.6	4.1	1.4
13. Use commercial materials	20.3	27.0	52.7

(table continues)

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Table 1 (cont.)

Likelihood of Use of Various Test Score-Enhancement Strategies

Strategies	% Disagreeing	% Neutral	% Agreeing
14. Check student's completed answer sheets	6.8	5.4	87.8
15. Send note home to parents to elicit cooperation	8.2	14.9	75.7
16. Teach test taking skills	4.1	20.3	75.7
17. Change answers of low achieving students	100.0	0.0	0.0

Note: $n = 74$

Table 2

Appropriateness of Use of Score Enhancing Strategies

Strategies	% Disagreeing	% Neutral	% Agreeing
1. Teaching objectives based on standardized test	6.8	56.8	36.5
2. Teach according to test objectives	8.1	54.0	37.9
3. Change completed answer sheets	97.3	1.4	1.4
4. Rephrase wording of questions	34.0	32.5	23.4
5. Give hints or clues	71.1	17.6	1.4
6. Dismiss low-achieving students from test taking	95.9	4.1	0.0
7. Present actual test items for practice	70.3	21.7	8.1
8. No special preparation	60.8	37.8	1.4
9. Develop curriculum based on test	5.4	56.7	37.8
10. Encourage students to do their best	0.0	1.4	98.6
11. Practice alternative form of test	9.5	23.0	37.6
12. Allow more than allocated time for testing	87.8	9.5	2.7

(table continues)

Table 2 (cont.)

Appropriateness of Use of Score Enhancing Strategies

Strategies	% Disagreeing	% Neutral	% Agreeing
13. Use commercial test preparation materials	2.8	31.1	66.2
14. Check student's completed answer sheets	4.1	9.5	86.5
15. Send note home to parents to elicit cooperation	1.4	19.0	79.7
16. Teach test taking skills	0.0	4.1	96.0
17. Change answers of low achieving students	98.7	1.4	0.0

Note: $n = 74$

Table 3

Correlations Between Strategies Considered Appropriate With Likelihood of Use

Strategies	Fall
1. Teaches objectives based on standardized test	.6976 **
2. Teach according to test objectives	.6523 **
3. Change completed answer sheets	.9805 **
4. Rephrase wording of questions	.7034 **
5. Give hints or clues	.3357 **
6. Dismiss low achieving students from test taking	.8242 **
7. Present actual test items for practice	.4554 **
8. No special preparation	.5365 **
9. Develop curriculum based on test content	.5263 **
10. Encourage students to do their best	.6860 **
11. Practice alternative form of test	.4968 **
12. Allow more than allocated time for test taking	.6127 **
13. Use commercial materials	.6257 **
14. Check students' completed answer sheets	.8433 **
15. Send note home to parents to elicit cooperation	.6137 **
16. Teach test taking skills	.1585
17. Change answers of low achieving students	.

Note: 1 $n = 74$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$